

Louisville's Nia Center Pathways to Opportunities

Louisville, Kentucky, EC

Imagine a centrally located landmark building that combines all the resources needed to enhance economic opportunity—capital, training, professional advice, even space for small and emerging businesses to begin operations—with a major transit center. Add a major marketing campaign to publicize those resources and watch the number of people who use the center grow.

Nia means *purpose* in Swahili. The purpose of the Nia Center is to create pathways of economic opportunity for Louisville residents. Because of the wide array of services this one-stop center offers, it has succeeded beyond expectations. Beginning in January 2000, says Carolyn Gatz, Lead Staff Representative for the EC, Mayor David L. Armstrong invested \$50,000 of city funds in a radio and bus advertising blitz for the center that is attracting 1,000 people a month (often more than 100 a day) to the center.

The Nia Center, located in the middle of the Louisville EC, is a beautiful building with a soaring glass front that will add an important piece of public art—a 15-foot stone sculpture of clasping hands—in spring 2000. Purchase and renovation of the building—a transportation hub for major Transit Authority of River City (TARC) routes in western Louisville—was financed with a Federal Transit Administration Livable Communities grant. Getting to the center is easy because it is a major transit hub for buses, including the Nia Night Owl, a door-to-door service for reverse-commute workers on late shifts that averages more than 80 riders each night.

The Nia Center's mission is to provide a seamless, one-stop environment that builds on the strengths of area residents to enhance business growth and development, to cultivate a marketable workforce, and to improve mobility through increased access to public transportation. "Marketing our services is essential," says Gatz. "We've proved it works."

The Nia Center is home to Career Resources, Inc., a one-stop career resource center that combines information on all public agencies and funding streams in one major center with a computer lab for job searches. Across the hall is the Workforce Skills Academy, a customized training program for selected growth sectors, funded with an EC grant and currently providing training in data entry, construction, and certification for nursing assistants. There is also an adult education center. Career Resources, Inc., is attracting more than 1,000 people to the center each month for career counseling, skill assessments, and job placement. The Workforce Skills Academy will provide customized training in certified nursing assistance to a new class each month, and recently added monthly sessions on data entry, in partnership with a local bank.

The Nia Center also offers business incubator space that can be leased to emerging and startup businesses, operated by the Louisville Community Development Bank (LCDB)-Enterprise Group. During its first 3 years of operation, LCDB, located across the street, provided more than \$17 million in loans to more than 137 businesses and created or saved more than 700 jobs. The LCDB-Enterprise Group, a nonprofit affiliate of the bank, specializes in established firms that are ready to move up. Its goals this year include developing relationships, expanding its business loan portfolio, and tripling the number of tenants in its business incubator.

The third floor houses the Louisville Business Resource Center, which hosts a small business development center, the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), and the U.S. Small Business Administration and offers professional guidance and Internet access. During February 2000, the

Louisville Business Resource Center had more than 400 client visits, working with people to explore their business ideas and linking them with counselors. Business development partners have implemented a shared assessment and referral system and created a tracking system for all business development services to avoid duplication.

The consensus of the Nia Center's business service providers is that aspiring entrepreneurs often focus on acquiring capital without considering the skills they need to successfully operate a business. Their goal is to increase the number of business loan applicants who come with those skills already in place.

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